



# Desert Choice Schools Improves Education for Students

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## DCS program aids children with mental and emotional disabilities

If you or someone you know has a child dealing with a social or mental disability, you know how hard it can be to allow them a proper education.

Children diagnosed with autism, a mental handicap, social disorders, mental illness or depression can find it hard to keep up with their peers. Because of this, the feeling of hopelessness can grow within parents and family/friends.



Photo: Desert Choice Schools

Desert Choice Schools was created by a former school psychologist to aid these children who deserve a proper integration back into the schooling system. The program utilizes highly trained personnel who are state-certified in teaching, CPR, first aid, intense therapeutic intervention and have also undergone 2 weeks of intense behavioral training.

Private day-schooling is used to provide children with autism, emotional disability, mild and moderate intellectual disability, other health impaired, specific learning disability and speech-language impairment a chance to gain the social and behavioral skills needed to integrate into the public schooling system. However, these day schools bus children to off-site facilities, which is quite costly.

**It is estimated that other providers' cost for an education system of this type was nearing the million dollar mark, said Jeff Simmons, CFO of the Buckeye Union High School District. Desert Choice was created in response to the high costs of these systems.**

Desert Choice is partnered with 9 school districts in the west valley, and around 20 school districts in the Metro Phoenix area. The program places staff members at the schools to provide children with all they need to reintegrate into the public schooling system.

The program offers most of the same activities as the public system such as field trips and dances, but also provides intense therapeutic social skills programs, group and individual counseling and unified sports.

**The way by which the program saves schools money is by offering all of these things on campus. This reduces immensely. It is estimated that the cost for 1 student, per year, is \$20,000; it is roughly double that cost for other providers.**

Co-founder Rick Weathers, a former school psychologist, stated that the success-rate has been amazing. **"A majority of students are able to reintegrate into public schooling anywhere between 90 and 270 days, which is a semester to a semester and a half,"** he said. Competitors take years to do the same.

**Kerry Thomas, a mother of 8 – who has/had 3 children in the Desert Choice program –** had this to say, "It can be stressful at times, but the schools have been amazing. I have more support here through the schools who take time to work with the kids." Kerry has children with autism, bipolar disorder and emotional issues; because of this, it is very difficult to manage. However, with excellent communication, weekly phone updates and very accessible teachers, she believes that **"for my situation Desert Choice is the best."**